

Expanding on My Answers to the Interview Questions

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on my recent career change to academia and my work in Memorial University of Newfoundland's (MUN) Indigenous Teacher Education program in Labrador. It focuses on two of the questions I was asked during the interview, what I have learned since accepting the position and aspects of relationship building that are important to working in community-based Indigenous Education. I examine some of the challenges I have encountered as a new academic and offer strategies that I have used to overcome these struggles.

Introduction

I want to begin this story by acknowledging the traditional lands of the Innu and Inuit where I live and work in Labrador. I am a professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland's (MUN) Faculty of Education. I work at the Labrador Institute in the community-based Indigenous Teacher Education Program, more specifically the Inuit Bachelor of Education that is a partnership between MUN's Faculty of Education and the Nunatsiavut Government.

I am new to working as an academic and to Labrador and they are intertwined in my life. I came to the academy by way of a meandering path that took me through numerous university campuses and degrees, a career in K-12 education, and a commitment to Indigenous education. I am a Mi'kmaw mother and grandmother and, as such, I have a vested interest in the education of my children, my grandchildren, and the future generations of children. Mi'kmaw Chief Darlene Bernard of Lennox Island First Nation gives voice to the fundamental values of my work in education: "At the end of the day it's about the children; it's always about the children" (Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs Secretariat and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2006).

As I consider my journey to the academy, I reflect on my interview for this position in community-based Indigenous teacher education, my first two years of work, and some of the challenges I have encountered as a new professor. I begin with two of the questions the search committee asked me that are particularly important to my contemplation. The first question was: "What do you know about Labrador?" and the second was: "How will you know what the needs of the community are for teacher education?"

Question One: What Do You Know about Labrador?

At one point in the interview I was asked what I knew about Labrador. I answered the question by listing the establishment of Goose Bay when the American Air Force Base was built here, the Innu protests of the low-level flying, the decline of the caribou population, and the construction of the Lower Churchill project. I was not satisfied with my answer, which was made worse by my limited ability to elaborate on any of these items. The knowledge I had came from media and books, not from lived experience. Several years ago a Mi'kmaw Elder explained to me that when we learn *about* something, it is "surface learning", but when we learn *from*, it is through observation and personal relationship with the other that the learning takes place. Learning *from* is "deep learning" (personal communication, October 23, 2009). I had some knowledge *about* Labrador but I did not have a relationship with the people or the place.

The centrality of relationship is a key element in Indigenous understandings of the world and building relationships is an essential part of developing community-based education. Little Bear (2009) describes the involvement of community as "a key aspect in the education of Aboriginal peoples. Because Aboriginal people understand the world in terms of relationships, the inclusion of community in the learning process of Aboriginal people is fundamental" (p. 22).

Developing Relationships in the Community

The first relationships that I developed in Labrador were with colleagues at the Labrador Institute. The small staff is an eclectic group of academics representing disciplines such as biology, geology, folklore, history, archaeology, and anthropology. Although I am a member of the Faculty of Education, my daily interactions in academia have been with scholars outside the field of education. I have also developed relationships with other educators through the community consultations in which I have been involved as well as the through the collaborative work with the education staff of the Nunatsiavut Government. It is implicit in the work to develop a community-based teacher education program that I was the Faculty of Education's presence in Labrador. This required that I be seen and known in the community. To this end I got involved in community events and volunteered on community non-profit boards. It was through these activities that I came to know more people.

Rather than the usual academic concentration on teaching and research, my initial scholarly work has been to build relationships with people and to work collaboratively with others in my work. This work goes by various names: decolonizing education, indigenizing education, and developing culturally relevant or culturally responsive education. In order to do such collaborative work, Kovach (2009a) emphasizes the importance of academics developing relationships with Indigenous communities, work she says, that cannot be measured by the same scholarly standards as research output is measured. Thus, it is typically not valued in the same way in academia (p. 66-67). In discussing what scholars and researchers require in order to collaborate with Indigenous peoples, she writes, "They have skills borne of relationships with Indigenous

communities; they know when to step up and when to step back... my experience tells me that these folks have humility, a sense of humour, and are attuned - all of which are relational skills (p. 65)." As I reflect on my experiences in the last two years, I consider how I have further developed my relationship skills.

Humility. Ms. C. (personal communication, June 4, 2015), a friend and community activist in Labrador, recently shared a story about humility. Several years ago she was learning to be a fire keeper for the sweat lodge ceremony. The task requires that the person use a shovel to move the hot grandfather rocks from an outside fire to a pit inside the lodge. Ms. C's forearms and face were getting burned from the intense heat because, as she described it, "In my pride of being given such an honour, I kept going to the fire tall and feeling proud. A wise woman, who was also a fire keeper, approached me and advised: 'Be humble. Stay low to the fire.'" To me, this story is a profound metaphor for working in community and the importance of humility.

As a relational skill, humility is about being open and listening to the truth of others. I understand it to mean that my truth is not the only truth and it is through such a stance that the contributions of others are valued. In *As if Indigenous Knowledge and Communities Mattered*, Ball (2004) writes: "educators and administrators who come from outside the community must not only respect its unique pattern of relationships but recognize that their own worldviews and traditions (institutional or otherwise) originate from within a particular culture and tradition" (p. 466).

As I think about humility and sharing different perspectives of the world, Mussell's (2008) explanation of openness to learning from others resonates with me. "One is called upon to be open to learning and to become changed for the better by the other; everyone and everything is a potential teacher in the ongoing journey to wholeness" (p. 336). I realized there was much I would have to learn in order to situate the curriculum of the Inuit Bachelor of Education in the Labrador context and infuse it with Inuit culture and values. To do this, I have had to remain open to learning from the people and this place, both of which have indeed been my teachers.

Humour. Sharing laughter within a relationship contributes to good feelings and "good and right relations" (Hodgson-Smith, 1997). Having a sense of humour, as a relationship skill, is one way of maintaining good relations with others. Humour can ease tension during difficult conversations and helps to maintain good feelings amongst people. As I consider my work in Labrador, I realize that being able to laugh at one's self is an integral part of working in community.

It was not until I watched *Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny* (Sandiford & Martin, 2006) that I appreciated, in a humorous way, some of the differences between Inuit and non-Inuit ways of thinking about the world. The film challenges such things as culturally irrelevant curriculum and the scientific objectification of people. It does this in a humorous, non-confrontational way so that the focus is on issues, not people.

Attuned. It is important to have an open mind and a good heart when interacting with others. Being attuned to others is to approach the other with respect, which requires an understanding that comes from listening and from learning. Steinhauer (2002) quotes a Cree manual when she writes: “Respect means you listen intently to others’ ideas that you do not insist that your ideas prevail. By listening intently you show honour, consider the well being of others, and treat others with kindness and courtesy” (p. 73).

Learning as much as I can about Inuit culture and values in one way to become more attuned to the people here. The National Committee on Inuit Education (2011) describes the vision for Inuit education. Included in this overview of Inuit worldview and the principles that govern life are: “showing respect and caring for others; being welcoming, open and inclusive; developing collaborative relationships to work together for a common purpose; environmental stewardship; knowledge and skills acquisition; being resourceful to solve problems; consensus decision-making; and serving” (p. 72). Knowing these principles helps me to be attuned to Inuit people.

As a result of the collaborative work between the Faculty of Education and the Nunatsiavut Government, there will be both a teacher education program offered by Memorial University and a concurrent Inutittut language program offered by the Nunatsiavut Government. Language is “a repository for all of the collective knowledge and experiences that a people, a society, or a nation has” (Little Bear, 2009, p. 22) and knowing an Indigenous language is a way to be more attuned to the people who speak that language. Knowing Inutittut is not essential to my daily communications but understanding the importance of language rejuvenation and supporting such work reflects a respectful orientation to the goals and values of the Indigenous community.

Relationship with the Land

In addition to learning from the people here, I have also learned from the land. Absolon and Willett (2005) explain that one component of researcher location is in relationship to the land. I have lived most of my life on the South Mountain in southwest Nova Scotia. My home there is at the headwaters of the Mersey River watershed, on the shore of a small lake named after my great-grandfather. My grandfather and great-grandfather were both trappers and guides and my memories of them are enveloped in the stories they told of their lives on the land. I have learned from my family and from other community Elders the lessons of living in a respectful relationship with the environment.

My Labrador home and workplace are on the shore of a river that goes by several names: Mishtashipu, Grand River, Churchill River, and Hamilton River. The variations in these names reveal much about the different peoples and histories of this area. My connection to the land of Labrador began with my connection to this river. I walk along it, watch in anticipation as the ice begins to break up in the spring, and canoe it. I live close to Muskrat Falls, the site of the Lower Churchill hydro project that is now being constructed. The project has impacted the river, the economy, and the politics of Labrador. Living downstream from the dam gives me a vested interest in the quick clay on the shore of the river and the rate of methyl mercury contamination in the fish. As I

use my computer to type the words on this page, I remind myself of my own use of electricity generated by the harnessing of river power. I continue to learn all that I can about the engineering of the dam and the impact on the river and the life of the river. I meditate on my personal accountability for my needs and wants, my respect for and obligations to this land, and the consequences of the construction for the coming generations.

Question Two: How Will you know?

A second question I was asked in the interview for this position was about creating a community-based education program. Even though there had been discussions between the Aboriginal groups and the Faculty of Education, there were not yet any decisions about the program. The question was: “How will you know what the needs of the community are for teacher education?” My answer would, no doubt, give some indication of my approach to developing community-based education.

Listening

As I contemplated a response, I grasped for concepts and words from my many years of study, particularly the research methods, place-based learning, and Indigenous education courses. I thought of Cora Weber-Pillwax (cited in Steinhauer, 2002) who says that she always waits “for that one glorious, culminating second when I know the whole answer to one question. I have been relearning that moment will not come, at least not while I am in thinking mode” (p. 69). I moved from academic thinking mode to lived experience and back again. I offered the only answer that I could formulate; the only answer to which I could be true. “I would listen to people,” I said. As Joseph (2008) points out, listening to the stories of others connects us to their lives. It “validates experience and feelings and represents a significant step” both toward the establishment of, or the restoration of, human relationships (p. 214).

Listening requires that we quiet our internal voice, open our minds, and, as Baldwin (2005) suggests, “accept an invitation into experiences that are not our own” (p. 7). Working in community requires respectful listening to one another; that we listen with compassion. Archibald (2008) advises that we listen, with “three ears: two on the sides of our head and the one that is in our heart” (p. 8) and, according to Hart (2010), collaborative relationships require “deep listening and hearing with more than the ears” (p. 10). When I practice deep listening, I have to separate my own needs or goals from those of others. I listen to try and relate to the speaker. When I can “relate to” another, I am also in “relationship with” the other. Sharing dialogue through listening and the associated skill of speaking are foundational components of communication. Graveline (1998) promotes that in sharing circles, human connections can develop “at a depth uncommon in the Western educational context” (p. 148).

I reflect on the ideas I have listened to as the community-based teacher education program has been established. The first is that Indigenous teacher education has to have high standards with the same academic expectations and rigor as all teacher education

programs. A second idea is that graduates require solid skills in teaching to ensure they know how to develop strong academic skills in students. And a third message is an unresolved question about language. Schools have played a role in language loss but they may now play a role in language retention and rejuvenation. This is an important and ongoing discussion for Labrador Indigenous communities.

Challenges

I have experienced two main challenges since I began working in the academy. The first is the challenge to adjust to life in the academy. There are many things I have had to learn about the work and the workplace and, since I am based off-campus, this challenge includes finding ways to stay connected to my colleagues in the Faculty of Education. The second challenge is common to all working people. It is the struggle to balance my personal life and my professional life, to find ways to rejuvenate myself, and to stay grounded in my own values and life journey.

Adjusting to Life in the Academy

The academy is a new workplace for me but it is not an unfamiliar place as I have spent 13 years studying in universities. When my third child was six months old, I enrolled in courses at the University of New Brunswick. A year later, my husband who was a military officer, was transferred to Calgary and I took up studies there. And a year after that, we moved to Yellowknife. Personal computers were becoming common but the internet was not widely used and distance education was limited to printed materials sent via surface mail.

The University of Manitoba and the Canadian Armed Forces collaborated to find a solution for armed forces personnel and their family members who wanted to obtain university degrees. This was often a struggle because of frequent moves that denied them the opportunity to complete studies at one university. The University of Manitoba developed a program whereby required courses could be obtained from other universities and would be accepted towards the intended degree. The stipulation was that two courses must be from the University of Manitoba and they provided numerous choices through correspondence courses. In addition to the University of New Brunswick, the University of Calgary, and the University of Manitoba, I transferred courses from Dalhousie University, St. Thomas University, and Athabasca University and met the requirements for an undergraduate degree in psychology. I subsequently received a Bachelor of Education, a Masters of Arts in psychology, two Masters of Education, and finally a Ph.D. in education. Although I think of myself as new to the academy, it is more a matter of it being a new workplace for me.

A new workplace. I was a teacher and school administrator for twenty years before coming to the academy to work. I was very passionate about working in public education and it was a familiar environment to me. I knew where to go or who to ask if I had a question, I was acquainted with the regulations and policies, and I was knowledgeable about contracts and working conditions. Although I had not planned a career move, I was

very interested and had the credentials to apply for the job in Indigenous education when it was advertised. I was offered the position and moved to Labrador in August 2013.

Since this was the first time I had worked in a university, I needed to learn about the academy as an organizational structure and as an employer. I experienced a steep learning curve that was marked by my own frustrations of not even knowing, at times, the right questions to ask. I paraphrased Stan Wilson when I reminded myself that, even if I did not know how to do something, I must, when asked, do it the best way that I know how (as cited in Steinhauer, 2002, p. 69).

Connecting with colleagues and the Faculty. There is a Faculty writing group that meets weekly on the main campus. When I expressed interest in joining, this group of women went out of their way to ensure I could participate via video conferencing. In addition to being a support group for academic writing, it was a frequent and reliable collegial opportunity for me to listen, ask questions, and learn more about academic life. I have also become friends with some of my colleagues and they are supportive in many ways. I use technology to attend meetings and to participate in Faculty Council. I also use it to teach in my graduate courses so that students can join my face-to-face classes through video conferencing as an alternative to on-line classes. Technology poses many challenges but it is critical given my location, my need to connect to the Faculty, and the geographic isolation of some graduate students across Labrador.

The Challenge to Balance the Personal and the Professional

Balancing home and work has always been a challenge for me as it is, I expect, for all working mothers. I now watch as my two oldest daughters take up the trials of being committed mothers, who are engaged in graduate studies, and work in a meaningful way for their Mi'kmaw community. Like me, they say that the way to balance home and work is to not distinguish between them but rather to take on a life where the work we do is an integral part of our lives.

Self care. On January 11, 1995 the school secretary came into my classroom and said, "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news but your house just burned down." According to the official report, the electrical fire was smoldering for several hours that morning while my children and I were still sleeping. No one was injured but all of our material possessions were destroyed, including my computer and all material related to the graduate program in which I was enrolled at the time. We found temporary housing and, when the snow melted, my children and I began to construct a house for ourselves. I arose very early, worked on my thesis before I left to teach for the day, and after returning home, I sawed and hammered until dark. I learned to build a house as I went along, beginning with knowing how to bolt a top plate onto a concrete foundation and culminating with interior finish work. I developed skills in using tools and I learned to be more precise in measuring. Building the house taught me that motivation and perseverance trump.

I remind myself of this story and I tell it to others because learning and overcoming adversity is part of the human journey. I think of the words of Lorri Neilsen (Cox, 2008) describing her perspective on such experiences:

My stories and others' stories are all necessary so that we can help each other learn not who is right or who knows more, but what really matters. How to be wise, how to listen deeply, how to change ourselves so that we can change the world around us. (p. 110)

My professor for the last two courses in my graduate degree in literacy challenged me to find another way of expressing what I had learned. I made a medicine wheel quilt in the four Mi'kmaw colours that represent the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional aspects of life. In each quadrant of the wheel I fastened one article that represented Mi'kmaw ways and one that represented non-Indigenous ways, as they relate to my family's life. For example, a child's moccasin and a hand knit sock stood for the physical aspects of life. The project was powerful and is reflected in my own teachings when I encourage students to demonstrate their learning through alternative formats.

Finding a guide. I have reflected further on the role of key people in my academic journey. I thought back to one piece of advice I was given after accepting the position with the Faculty of Education. A former member of my dissertation committee suggested to "get yourself an Elder. Community work is hard work and you will need someone to guide you." Upon convening Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Justice Murray Sinclair advised each commissioner to have a "spiritual adviser" to support them in the work that would be challenging. "And there are going to be times when we ask ourselves whether it's worth it. We're going to ask ourselves whether we can do this or not" (Kennedy, 2015, n. p.). He emphasized that all three commissioners had a responsibility to take care of their own health, adding "If this commission fails because you fall down and can't get up, then no matter what the good reason is that you can't make it, this commission will always be seen as a failure." These words resonate with me because I stepped into a role important to the university engaging with the Indigenous community to develop a new program. I realized that if I were to fall it would indeed reflect badly on the university.

I work with Elders and Traditional Teachers in Nova Scotia but it was important for me to connect with a Labrador Elder. I did so and she has guided my understanding of the people, the place, and my role here. She has helped me to be culturally grounded, which Kovach (2009b) defines as "the way that culture nourishes the researcher's spirit during the inquiry, and how it nourishes the research itself" (p.116). It is this Elder who has supported me in keeping true to my own ways of knowing, doing, and being in the world. When I am grounded, I am able to rejuvenate my energy and keep myself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually balanced.

Conclusion

I began to teach in the academia after many years as a student in graduate and undergraduate studies. Although I have had other careers, my work in academia has involved much new learning. I have had to admit to myself that what I do not know is far greater than what I do know and I have had to continue to gain knowledge that is important to my work in community-based Indigenous teacher education. I have developed meaningful relationships with the people of Labrador, which required that I hone my relational skills: humility, a sense of humour, and being attuned. I have listened with an open mind and a good heart. And I have connected to the land and to this place.

Colleagues and Elders are all an important part of my life as I learn more about my new workplace. An Elder guides me and helps me stay grounded in my life. She reminds me of my strengths and she reminds me to care about people more than the job. I reach out to stay connected with colleagues on the main campus. These relationships guide me and the work I do.

Msit Nokmaq

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